
11-15-1992***Bridget Skla's Dreamworld Tea***

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Recommended Citation

Lide, Walter (1992) "*Bridget Skla's Dreamworld Tea*," *The Mythic Circle*: Vol. 1992 : Iss. 14 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mcircle/vol1992/iss14/14>

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Fiction; Bridget Skla's Dreamworld Tea; Walter Lide

BRIDGET SKLA'S DREAMWORLD TEA

by Walter Lide

Just as the sun began setting in a fire colored sky, Bridget Skla stooped over an old wool blanket and collected the herbs she'd been drying since sunrise. With trading at the traveling bazaar winding down, she could not keep from thinking about the grimness of life. With a disenchanted sigh, she arranged her herbs in a basket, threw the old blanket over her shoulders and headed back toward the caravan space she shared with her sister's family, consisting of a husband, wife and three children. *Maybe business will be better tomorrow*, she thought, while glancing at an orange and yellow sky.

Shortly after sunset, Bridget sat alone in her tent blending the recent harvest into potions of healing and incense. And while working by flame of a single candle, she realized that there would always be things to do, but seldom would there be anyone to share them. At thirty-two, she felt a hole in her life as wide and as dark as the Great Forlorn Forest, far to the west.

A wayfarer's life came hard to a woman without a man. The wives, with no lives of their own, resented Bridget's role among the small band of travelers and feared her charms. The husbands, meanwhile, knew better than to be seen talking with her for more than a few moments. And as she sat counting, cataloging and blending her plants the sounds of barking dogs and neighing horses drifted in from outside. She continued her work until smells of boiled cabbage and woodsmoke began tickling her nostrils.

She felt grateful for the love of her sister's family and chose not to push her welcome. Only two or three times from one full moon to the next did she sit at their table. Most of her time she spent alone, and since regular meals held little importance for her, she finished off her nights with a steaming cup of her special blend of tea. Dreamworld Tea she called it and in the fourteen years since perfecting the elixir, she'd always have at least two or three cups a night.

And that disturbed her. Having seen so many young men of her tribe become slaves to their endless craving for alcohol, she wondered if something similar was occurring with her and her Dreamworld Tea. It didn't help her sleep any better, she knew, but the dreams--they were all she had to live for. To her they were as real as the worldly life, and since dogged by the effects of a false prophecy, she spent as much time as she could on the dreamside.

Bridget could not help her rage at the sounds of celebration from outside. The indwellers were coming together and building a huge central fire that lighted

up the dark. And around it they began singing songs and telling stories. Bridget, meanwhile, could not help wondering what it must feel like to really be part of her tribe. Those fires, however, were no place for her. Years ago, when she first tried to attend, Gilking Rhymer got up and sang a mean spirited song he'd made up about her.

All of her pain, suffering and humiliation were chronicled and the words cut deep. The rhymer sang of a prophecy that went back over a hundred generations among the tribes. At the precise moment of Bridget's birth, the moon covered the sun and an eerie green light engulfed the land. A flock of swans flew over her family's tent and circled three times before flying off again in the direction from which they'd come.

From then on, Bridget became prophecy's victim. For the signs foretold that a son would be born to her and he would eventually unite all of the independent caravan families and make them a force to be reckoned with. The signs also told that Bridget would be the future king's mother.

On the first new moon after her sixteenth birthday, all the tribes gathered deep in the Forlorn Forest for the sacred rites. She was penetrated by a young man near her age from one of the other tribes. Unlike herself, the father was chosen by tribal elders and his identity would never be revealed.

Gilking Rhymer sang on, painting a picture with his words of a woman large with child and how on the final night of her carrying, a woman-child was birthed into the land, grotesque looking and lifeless.

The more superstitious among the tribes saw the stillbirth as a curse from the Goddess and over the years people had taken to laying all blame for their own personal misfortunes right at Bridget's feet. Almost immediately, the young girl, just three months shy of her seventeenth birthday, found herself a near outcast among outcasts.

* * * *

For some reason, Bridget drank five cups of tea that night and not even the festive sounds from the big fire irritated her any longer. She fell slowly into a peaceful dreamside world where the words of the rhymer's song held no meaning.

Next morning she awoke with the sun, dressed, then stepped cautiously outside. Hints of winter were everywhere and as she gazed to the south, the landscape was dotted with squat canvas huts and wooden wagons. Leaves had already begun to forsake

the branches that held them and her breath turned to mist in the light of a cold gray dawn.

Although her people roamed the farthest reaches of the Land of Three Kings, it was outside of the town walls of Falston that Bridget felt most at home. For as far back as she could remember, her caravan along with a few other tribes that traveled the region, gathered at Falston for the winter and operated a profitable bazaar during the Season of Winds.

Daybreak that morning ushered in a near festive mood of happy anticipation and even as her breath turned quickly to vapor, Bridget took delight in what she saw. Trees standing since before she was born were used for drying laundry and, like the stone wall that separated them from the town, were decorated with garments of many colors. Sounds of crying infants mingled with the early morning sounds of barking dogs and restless horses. Family cooking fires came slowly to life and, under the dull shine of first light, townspeople began making their way to the bazaar.

Rather than attend her booth that morning, Bridget decided to make a last harvest of certain wildflowers and herbs she'd need during the Seasons of Winds. *May as well enjoy what's left of the fall weather*, she thought, turning back to her tent.

It happened in the space of a heart beat. The entire bazaar fell suddenly silent and neither horse neighed nor dog barked. Even the infants stopped their crying and the only sound was the slow and steady beat of hoofs tromping upon a cold morning's ground. She glanced toward the noise and saw a stranger driving his reluctant mule deep into the heart of the camp. *He's got a lot of gumption, riding into the living area uninvited*, she thought. *And with the bazaar not even open yet*. Although his mule was a small one, Bridget saw the emblem of Lord Shalia's service sewn prominently to the left side of his frayed cloak. *That still don't give him the right*.

Bridget had traveled far, wide and throughout the land of the kings and despite her reputation as a first rate healer, she'd been treated little better than dirt. But such was life for a member of the wayfaring tribes, she knew. Merchant, artisan, farmer or cleric, everyone looked down their noses at her people. It was a fact of life and for the healer woman, there was little difference between those who worked for a living and the lords, ladies, kings and queens who ruled them.

All eyes were upon the outdweller as he plodded further into their camp. Finally, Bridget realized that the stranger was headed straight for her. And as if in a dream, she momentarily found herself lost in the deep blue of his eyes. Worse yet, she could not help but notice the fine hard chest beneath his garments.

I have been much too long without a man, she thought while stifling a sigh. Even when she saw that he missed his left leg, her blood continued growing hot with fever. An eerie sadness seemed to cloud his otherwise clear

blue eyes and he looked as if he'd been chased by ghosts and had not a decent sleep in years.

As he came closer, his pain made him look older than what must have been his years. *Eight. Maybe ten years' difference between us*, she thought. *Not bad*. Although she'd long ago given up seeking a lover, she still carried the torch of eternal hope.

"I seek the woman called Bridget Skla," the official said from atop his tired animal, while pulling it to a stop directly in front of her.

Turning red with rage she stood almost nose to nose with the intruder's mule. *Oh, how I despise the nobility and their piddle lapping officials*, she pondered.

She stared intently into his eyes before speaking, and despite her confusion at what his eyes told her of him, her voice came sharp with defiance. "I am the woman called Bridget Skla," she said, her eyes still locked upon his. "What of it?"

Even as she held his gaze, her healer's mind had already begun it's subtle and wordless probing. *He's a different kind of bird, all right*, she concluded. Unlike other servants of the aristocracy, the man and his tired beast were ordinary and he lacked the garish finery and arrogance of the others.

"I beg that you forgive my intrusion, my lady," he rasped while swinging down from his mount and untying a crutch, all in a single motion. "I have need of your services. I haven't much, but I'll gladly give all that I have."

Bridget nodded and heaved a loud sigh filled with compassion. "I understand," she said. "You run from the ghosts."

The outdweller nodded. "Follow me, then," she continued. "There is a cure and it will not cost much."

Once inside her tent, she set about blending her customer a very fresh and special batch of Dreamworld Tea, and all the while, encouraging him to put voice to his dreams. The visions and voices of which he spoke were worse than nightmares. They were an attack on the spirit and she easily understood why he'd been afraid to shut his eyes most nights. At the end of his tale, he shrugged. "And I've been eating the petals of blue and yellow mountain flowers to stay awake."

"That stuff will make you crazy," she advised while scooping the potion into a small clay jar. "Drink a cup of this and then try making love with your wife before going to sleep. Any one of those two suggestions will surely bring contentment to your dreams."

"Wife?" The official seemed bewildered. After a slight pause, however, he sagged his shoulders. "That is another long and sad story," he said.

Having obtained the information she was after, Bridget turned from her work table and gazed at her visitor. It's been his eyes all along, she suddenly realized. For whenever she looked into his sad blue orbs, his pain and his wisdom touched her heart. *Even with*

only one leg, she thought, attempting to lighten her mood, *he's a pretty good catch.*

"If you don't have a wife, I'm quite sure you have more than enough women. Many would no doubt leave their mates for the likes of you."

"And for what use? I lost more then my leg at Blood River. And because of that, I eventually lost my wife." His eyes suddenly showed a pain that went far beyond mere sadness. "She was a good woman and stayed faithful for almost five years. But when she took a young lover into her life, I knew that she would not be around much longer."

"So the ghost you run from is the Battle of Blood River?"

"I can't fight sleep forever. And when sleep finally wins out again, I'll need your tea."

Taking a good size pinch from a small heap of powdered Purple Rose, she discreetly filled a nearby incense burner and set the purple powder ablaze. It flared briefly, then settled into a slow fragrant burn. "What you need," she said, "is sleep. And you need it now. I fear for your health and sanity. People who fight sleep soon find that they cannot fight their dreams. They will come. And no matter how hard you fight sleep, your dreams will eventually have their way."

"It is my burden to carry, my lady."

"So it is. But it is my burden as a healer to ease pain and suffering wherever I may come across it." Without another word, she began brewing a pot of Dreamworld Tea.

Finally, her task completed, she poured two cups and handed one to her guest. "I have lighted a pinch of Purple Rose," she said. "It brings a peaceful sleep."

"It'll take more than mere fragrance to put me under," he said with a chuckle. "I've eaten enough mountain flowers to keep an army awake."

Bridget shrugged. "We shall see," she said, grinning a knowing smile.

"Still, I would be honored to share a cup of tea with you. It isn't often that I have company of a lady. But enough of me. Tell me something of yourself?"

A flood of words and tangled emotions poured from her lips. It had been so long a time since anyone had cared to ask. And had it not been for the sleep inducing effects of her Purple Rose incense, she might have talked for hours.

"I don't even know your name, sir," she finally said. "And here I am talking your ears off."

"It is good for me to hear of another's pain for a change. My name is Mamack One Leg, swordsman by training and stablemaster by chance."

Bridget tried to smile but was overtaken by the urge to yawn.

Briefly, the stranger dozed. A heartbeat later his eyes snapped open and he stared straight at Bridget. "Your incense is stronger than my mountain flowers," he said with astonishment. "And I fear that I can no longer stay awake."

"I know," she said, taking him by the hand and leading the way.

She felt him tense and try and pull away, but being quite used to the smoke-like drowsiness brought on by the Purple Rose, she easily settled him onto her pallet.

Quickly edging as close to the tent wall as possible and with his back facing her, Mamack curled up like a frightened child. "My sleep is not peaceful," he said. "Yet I cannot make it back to the Royal Stables and have



no choice but to impose on your hospitality, my lady."

Bridget didn't think twice about crawling onto the pallet and snuggling up against his strong hard back. "I'll be right here with you," she said, wrapping her arms around him and laying her open palms upon his chest. "I promise."

* * * *

They rose at dusk and Bridget immediately noticed how Mamack's eyes avoided her. She, on the other hand, could not take her eyes from him and moved about her chores with a certain lightness of step. Finally, she handed her guest his jar of tea and the stablemaster bowed, left her tent and headed for his lord's stables.

She glowed from her core and not even Mamack's earlier discomfort had snuffed out its sparkle. As evening wore on, she basked in the luscious memories of her most recent dream. Somehow, she realized, Mamack's averted eyes and unsteady voice only confirmed they had shared the same dream. And there had been no hesitation in the gentle and confident way he'd made love to her. On the dreamside, he was neither wounded nor wanting.

Later that night, Bridget did not fall right off to sleep, but chose to lay awake remembering her dream. *It'd be worth sleeping a little later in the morning, she thought. At most, I'll miss a few coppers and maybe a small silver.* Early bird clients were known for their unwillingness to part with wealth.

By sunrise, however, her euphoria had turned to melancholy and she could not sleep in earnest. Not even Purple Rose and valerian root tea brought sleep. Her dark despondency ran so deep she thought it would split her in half. Although unable to afford another's days loss of business, she decided for one last harvest and a quiet afternoon of bathing in a nearby stream.

At high noon, she'd gathered neither flower nor herb, but had spent her entire morning irritated with regret. "I'll probably never see him again," she said to herself. "I should have told him how I too shared in his dream."

Upon reaching her favorite spot in a private and isolated area along the stream, she slipped out of her clothes and into the water. *The noon hours grow colder,* she thought as a mind numbing misery resettled itself deeper into her bones.

* * * *

Daybreak came early and morning's chill was not as sharp as it had been only a half moon earlier. During the cold season, Bridget had taken to drinking four cups of tea each night. With each passing night her dreams became more and more real, yet she longed for the warm season when her caravan would once more start its huge circular trek through but a small portion of the Land of Three Kings. Besides, she needed a break from the intense silence of her winter's life and the

strange unfoldment of her dreams.

They were a little disquieting at first, but when she discovered that on the dreamside at least, she was with child, her joy knew no bounds. Throughout the long dark winter her only regret was that Mamack One Leg did not share in her blessings.

It had happened so discreetly that she failed to notice it at first, but her tribespeople were treating her differently. The indwellers began talking among themselves about how a failed prophecy may yet come true and wondered what kind of powerful magic would cause so many of the caravan to share in the same dream some nights. And although no one professed to know anything, all agreed that whatever was taking place had the hand of the Goddess upon it.

The first moon of summer was the most profitable she'd ever seen. And not too long after that, curiosity overcame even the best of her kinfolk and they began approaching her in small groups, hoping to understand the meaning of a shared dream. Bridget was spooked when she learned that by now, almost everyone in her tribe had shared in her dreams.

The final moon phases of her dreamside pregnancy were unlike anything she could have ever imagined and the small groups turned into a steady stream of visitors and customers. Even in daylight, everyone wide awake and living their worldly lives, her people were awestruck in her presence and had even started competing among themselves for her attentions.

Despite her new found acceptance, however, Bridget knew a powerful and heavy fear which hung like a rock in the pit of her stomach. Fear of living through another pregnancy, even if only on the dreamside, only to give birth to another stillborn, came close to costing her sanity. Worse yet, she felt split between two worlds and often found a blood chilling confusion in both.

Somehow, the shared dreams had reached beyond her immediate tribe and managed to touch the sleep of all the tribes in the land. Visitors began arriving several times a day just to see for themselves and report back to their own caravans.

* * * *

On the night of her newborn's birth, Bridget lay asleep in her tent while a silver band encircled the moon and a clear sky shook with explosions of thunder and lightning. And at the precise moment of her daughter's birth, a bolt of flashing light shot down from the sky and effortlessly split a huge boulder not far from where Bridget slept.

As a midwife took the newborn into her arms and prepared to lay the child on its mother's breast, the midwife gulped. "It is a girl," she whispered in quiet puzzlement.

"So it is," agreed a second midwife, assisting in the dreamside birth. "But look at those eyes."

"Mother of us all," exclaimed the first. "She is a child

of magic, that is sure."

"And so a different kind of prophecy has come to pass." The voice belonged to the High Priestess who, having arrived from the Isle Greymist only moments before the birth, had watched in silence as the unbelievable event began to unfold. "This is a new kind of prophetic unfoldment and no one back at Greymist, neither Priestess nor Seer, can comprehend its meaning. We often have the same dream many nights and have realized that all activity seems to emanate from this caravan. But for now, all we can do is be patient and see what the Goddess has in store for us."

Bridget slept a dreamless sleep after that and did not awake until long after sunrise. The instant that her mind cleared itself of sleep, she began fuming with rage. *So what if there is magic at work on the dreamside, she wondered. What about the here and now?* After birthing a daughter that didn't exist, fathered in a dream by a castrated man who she barely knew, she itched with impatient frustration.

It didn't take long for her to realize, however, that the dreamside was where she truly belonged. The womanchild, now named Epshada, grew bigger by the night and quickly became the joy of both worlds for Bridget. When the caravan returned to the holdings of Lord Shalia for the winter season, the healer woman allowed herself a brief twinge of hope. That very night, she lay awake on her pallet. "Goddess," she said, very softly. "If your hand be truly upon this..." She could not finish and instead turned on her side, curled up like a wounded child and cried. "I am selfish, impatient and ungrateful for all that I do have," she chastised herself. "What right do I have to ask for more?"

Next morning, dawn broke clear and crisp. Bridget rose early and immediately left camp to check out the condition of the local plant life. She'd barely started her journey and was scrutinizing a clump of Alfron growing strong in a field when she spotted Mamack riding toward her on his dilapidated looking mule.

"When I first heard that your caravan had returned, I immediately sought you out, my lady," he said frantically, pulling to a stop and dismounting. "I must speak with you about the strange turn my dreams have taken..."

"I know, Mamack," she said softly. "The day we met we shared a dream and my life has not been the same since."

For a moment, Mamack could not speak. "You mean...?"

"I enjoyed it as much as you," she answered with a smile.

His eyes grew wide with disbelief and he hobbled along side as she turned west and headed for her favorite spot at a nearby stream.

Later, they veered from the fields and moved toward an area thick with bushes and tall grass. The stream was still a good distance off and since they had

to travel slowly due to Mamack's war injury, they had ample opportunity to enjoy each other's company. Bridget was happy to learn that Mamack also thought that something wondrous was happening.

"My lord does not allow his servants to worship any god but his own," he said. "But whenever I make my prayers in private, they are always to the Goddess. And I know that She has Her hand in this."

"And her enchantment grows thick," Bridget said. "Thick like churning butter."

For the remainder of their journey they walked in silence. Before long, Bridget began making an amazing discovery. While fully awake and alert, she found that by merely picturing her daughter in her mind's eye, she could drift and out of the dreamside at will. It was not unpleasant, but whenever she tried it, an eerie tingle lingered on her skin. Although she did not understand this new and marvelous discovery, neither did she doubt it.

Arriving at the banks of the stream, Bridget turned and laid an open palm softly upon her companion's chest. "I have just learned to do something that is most amazing," she said. "And I'd like for you to learn it, too. First thing," she continued hoarsely, "is to close your eyes."

* * * *

They dozed peacefully as the sound of flowing water drifted in and out of their awareness. Bridget's spine began tingling with anticipation as Mamack touched his lips to hers. An instant later, she found herself coasting into a dark warm space somewhere deep inside of her soul. Her lover's kiss, meanwhile, grew more and more passionate even as the way in which he lightly stroked her breasts grew in gentleness.

They surrendered unto one another as she felt herself melt to his touch. *I'm going to do more than tell him*, she thought, her hands seeking out the knotted rope which held up his pants. *This time, I'm going to show him how I feel*. Her target found, her nimble fingers deftly undid the knot and she was surprised to hear the craving of her own thoughts take to words. "Make love to me, Mamack," she implored in a throaty whisper. "I've been much too long without you."

But even as she settled into the slow soothing rhythm of her dreamside encounter, a fleeting chill shot up her spine like frozen flame and for a very brief moment, Bridget knew that the birth of her dreamchild signaled a new kind of life in the Land of Three Kings and the possibilities were as frightening as they were tantalizing.

Just as quickly as the crystal clear comprehension had come, however, it shattered like glass in her mind. *There will be plenty of time to grow accustomed to the changes*, she thought and was promptly confounded at the sudden sound of an impassioned sigh that seemed to come from some long forgotten and primeval place deep in her gut.